

Gobbledygook or wisdom?

Clarify terms to steer a true course to the future

Mission, vision, strategy, goals. These words are tossed about in countless meetings, at all levels in private and public-sector organizations. If you're not designing a strategy, communicating a vision, or revving up your mission, you're just not with it!

When it comes to unifying the workforce in a newly merged culture, or tackling the problem-solving and decision-making needed to improve customer loyalty, a carefully designed and freely shared strategic direction is critical. It's a challenge faced by leaders at every level of the organization, from the front lines to the boardroom.

The core components of a successful strategic direction are *mission*, *strategy*, *vision* and *goals*. And the first step is to be clear about the meaning and intent of those terms.

Mission

A mission statement is a concise expression of productive purpose. It answers these questions:

- Why do we exist?
- What need in society or in our market do we fulfill?
- What do we do? (Usually involves providing some form of help to customers.)

Mission reveals purpose and guides activities. It describes the value that customers can expect to receive. An effective mission statement is a reference point for employees at all levels as they make decisions.

Strategy

An overall business strategy may contain several elements—sales, economic, growth, human resource, information management, service and many others.

Strategy differentiates your organization from its competitors and defines *how* you intend to fulfill your mission. Your service strategy, for example, may answer questions such as:

- What counts most to our customers?
- How do we want customers to see us?
- What specific actions can we take to improve our customers' perceptions of our service and organization?

Service strategy provides a rationale for specific actions that lead to customer loyalty.

Successful strategies are believable and valuable to all employees. The more intimately employees are involved in creating a strategy, the more they will believe in it.

Of course, strategies also must be doable. All departments need to have a say in whether they can deliver what a strategy promises.

Vision

Vision is a detailed picture of the future that an organization seeks to create for itself. It describes how people in the front lines and support functions will relate to customers and each other.

A vision is a word picture of your desired future. It's more than a short slogan. It uses concrete and descriptive language that helps all employees to see the same vision.

When employees have the opportunity to help create a vision, it becomes a shared vision. This enhances relationships and people work together better. When a vision is imposed on employees, however, they often comply rather than commit to it.

A shared vision connects with the personal visions of

people throughout the organization and motivates employees to take responsibility for making it happen.

Vision is idealistic. It may not always appear attainable, because a vision exists to "stretch" the organization toward greater heights of achievement. A successful vision usually is driven by the external customers' expectations. It can add value to the lives and experiences of external customers as well as the organization's employees.

Goals

Goals provide a tangible target—a way to focus, track and improve your strategy and vision. As any business person will agree, focus is essential for success.

Goals represent a measurable expression of achieving the strategy and vision. They are action oriented as well as performance or behavior based.

Like the other elements, goals are most successful when they are shared and supported by the organization at large. Desired and actual outcomes should be communicated to all, and frequent progress updates can serve as both reminders and motivators as they foster a sense of teamwork throughout the organization.

Goals may be organizational or departmental, short-term or long-term. When goals are achieved and employees share in the news and rewards, everyone celebrates the successes.

Involvement creates wisdom

When everyone in the organization knows and believes in the direction you are leading them, they can

work effectively to help get you there. The key is remembering that one of the most important leadership qualities is heart. To be most powerful, strategic direction must involve engaging people's hearts, and it must agree with their values.

This is why the "corporate speak" of so many companies' mission, strategy and vision statements is so

much "gobbledygook" to the people in the organizations. Think about what's important to your people and your customers, not just what's important to you as a leader. Too many mission statements and visions (for example, "to become the leading exporter of microchips in the world") are so self-serving that employees are embarrassed to read

them, much less live them.

When all employees understand the terms and participate fully in shaping these four elements of strategic direction, your organization is on course to a successful future. ■

A leader's quick guide to successful communication

Tell employees

**What they want to know,
When they want to know it,
In terms they understand.
And always listen to what they have to say.**

In successful organizations, everyone knows what's going on. Employees know the goals and challenges they face as a team. They know when they are succeeding. They know what's expected of them. They realize how important their own roles are to the overall well-being of their work group and the whole organization.

Most of all, in successful organizations, all employees are assured that their leaders involve them, listen to them and respect their opinions as strategies evolve and operational decisions are made.

The same philosophy extends to the way the organization treats its customers.

Successful communication is indispensable in today's world. What is "successful communication"?

Clear and timely: minimizes duplication of efforts, frustration, burnout, costly mistakes and uninformed decision making. (There's no award for "most words used to express a thought.") Often, fewer words lead to greater understanding.

Honest: raises confidence, encourages loyalty. If you sugarcoat unpleasant facts, avoid bad news or cry wolf, expect poor attention to future communications.

Relevant: the right information, delivered to those who

need to know it in relevant terms to avoid information overload (ignoring memos and reports because there's simply too much to digest).

Friendly: simple, jargonless, colorful language with a touch of humor makes people comfortable, and it fosters a sense of belonging.

Appropriate: determines the best vehicle to communicate a message; saves direct costs and avoids misjudgments about the importance of the message. Would you hop a jet to visit your next door neighbor? Rollerblade® to Brazil? Choosing the right transportation for your message is nearly as important as the message itself.

Productive: transfers information that can be used on the job, enriches careers and enables everyone to demonstrate leadership qualities.

Respectful: avoids phrases that drive employees crazy, such as, "You don't have to know that." Ever meet co-workers or bosses who desperately cling to their information strongbox, afraid that if they tell you anything, they'll lose their information advantage?

Complete: Your employees have computers, fax machines, telephones and copiers, but they don't have crystal balls—and neither do you! There's a clear and present danger in assuming what the other person is thinking, expecting, understanding, approving or disapproving.

Look, listen and learn. Tune up your communication skills and notice how people suddenly begin paying attention.

